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ABSTRACT

Research in secondary school composition instruction indicates that (1) emphasis on writing for the teacher-as-examiner is prevalent, (2) prewriting activities are limited, (3) there is little discussion of approaches to the topic or what information should be included, and (4) activities to help students while they are writing are almost nonexistent. A teaching method that can prevent students' anxiety and dislike for sustained writing is to treat writing assignments metaphorically as a journey, in which the teacher draws a map from start to destination and participates with the students in the journey and all of its uncertainties. A book report of four coherent paragraphs is an ideal journey. A map is drawn containing sections marked introduction, main characters, the best scene, and conclusion. Students write a paragraph for each section, in sequence, receiving whatever assistance they need while they write. After the first paragraph, students will have direction for the second paragraph, and most will be able to put ideas on paper with surprising ease. In four or five class periods they will be able to write a fairly well-organized composition. Anxiety will be reduced, confidence instilled, and a lesson will be taught that unites form and content with language development across a spectrum of vocabulary, diction, and sentence structure. (Sample student paragraphs are appended.) (HTH)

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PREWRITING ACTIVITIES: GOING NOWHERE IS A LONG, LONG JOURNEY

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THE OBSTACLES

Educational statistics can be misleading, even deliberately so; they can also be sober indications of the state of the art. Here are items belonging to the latter group of interest to teachers of the composing process at the junior and senior high school level.

Item: only about ten percent of English class time is devoted to writing of at least one paragraph in length.

Item: emphasis on writing for the teacher-as-examiner is prevalent in all subject areas, including English.

Item: the usual composition task is one of organizing and reporting back information provided in textbooks or by the teacher.

Item: prewriting activities are limited with students receiving, in most cases, explicit guidelines only about the length of the paper, with little discussion of approaches to the topic or what information should be included. In a typical assignment just over three minutes passes from the announcement of the work until pen hits paper.

Item: finally, activities designed to help students while they are writing are almost nonexistent.

This list could be longer, and, unfortunately, it is a partial summary of actual findings from Applebee, Lehr, and Auten's research[1] for the National Study of Secondary School Writing. Join to the above study the latest conclusions from the National Assessment of Reading and Literature as reported in the press: "Students who breeze through multiple-choice questions on literature are at a loss when asked to put pen to paper... to explain and defend the judgments they make."[2]

Are the findings from the two studies related? I do not know. I do know that, based on more than a decade and a half of teaching English, the writing of compositions and the subsequent grading of them takes place as part of a sometimes painful paper-moving ritual, as fixed as the ebb and flow of the tides. The ingredient sorely lacking is the teaching of composition, which I strongly feel is connected to the learning of composition with a causality that is palpable.

There are no scapegoats. We know why the teaching of composition has not received its due emphasis: time, sweat, and more patience than Job. Recently, Bettelheim wrote in The Atlantic Monthly that "learning to read is not an entertainment but hard work."[3] The gist is applicable in our case.

We know what bears fruit and what does not. From Applebee, Lehr, and Auten we learn that "most (writing) tasks separated problems of constructing coherent texts from those of remembering subject-area information and concepts." As a result, students tend not to integrate learning even within one subject. The teacher plays out the role of examiner rather than participant, and the students see their roles as suppliers of information-for-a-grade rather than as writers of effective and convincing statements.

ANOTHER ROUTE: CONFESS THE UNSPEAKABLE

One path toward the teaching of writing might take as its credo a reality principle to replace to some extent the pleasure principle.

A reality principle acknowledges the unspoken: students, in general, do not find sustained writing a pleasant task; they are fearful, insecure, and, at best, want desparately to please so as to get the mark; they are pitifully lost at times and stagger with gasping logic and language to an often misty destination; and they most willingly will take direction if someone can only speak a language of clarity to the inexperienced minds.

For the teachers the reality principle enunciates a similar line of unspoken thoughts: instructors desperately want to read readable material from their students; the grading process is more often depressing than reassuring; curriculum content and time press ineluctably against saner pacing; and the sheer physical constraints of the bell make logical, complete, productive thinking a wish that exceeds one's reach.

THE MAP: A GUIDING HAND

To be lost at night in an unfamiliar city, with windshield condensation obscuring from view the already hard-to-read street signs must surely be one of the most unpleasant experiences of our lives. It is an apt metaphor to describe the plight of the twelve or thirteen-year-old of average ability as they travel through book reports,

summaries, criticisms and varied essay-type questions.

The teacher of composition can draw a map from start to destination and bring the travelers home only if he or she participates in the journey with its uncertainties, delays, and occasional surprises. Mutual participation is founded on these premises:

1. The students must perceive the teacher as a guide and not solely as an examiner.
2. A trusted guide has the allegiance of followers: students will take advice seriously if they believe the advice is "up front" and truly meant to help them.
3. The guide should be ready and willing to accept a detour, a question, a suggestion which challenges his or her conceptions of the route to be taken.
4. The guide must set the destination in language that is understandable and free of abstractions. The kids want to know where they are going, and no one but the teacher is so well-prepared at that moment to map out the trip.
5. Above all, the guide never waivers in the belief that the skeletal map can be fleshed out in detail with myriad variations. The orderliness of the journey provides the opportunity for individual novelty which otherwise might never be seen.

THE BOOK REPORT: PROSAIC BUT SUCCESSFUL

Books as personal experiences for the reader ought to be a source of ideas for writing. Unfortunately, whenever I make first mention of selecting books, the seventh and eighth graders grimace and, with that unmistakable tone say, "Do we have to write book reports?" I tell them that they most certainly will write because they will want to tell me about their book. No one seems pleased or relieved, and, until the initial writing assignment is underway, I am still met with anxious comments of the "how long does it have to be?" type. When the final comment has been written sometime later, I have actually had students say, "that assignment was so easy, too easy." That is music I like because they are really telling me that the composing process was not the nightmare imagined.

In schematic form below follows an outline for "working through" a series of lessons in which student and teacher roll up sleeves and work at perfecting the process--

thinking, reasoning logically, and communication--which constitutes the essential in education.

Overall Goal: four, coherent paragraphs which present a book recently read in about 200-250 words.

Preliminaries: to reduce anxiety, and confusion

1. The class is told that they will work with the teacher in the class on a report about a mystery book previously selected during a visit to school library. Many students will not believe you.
2. Students are told not to write up a report before the class works on it together. (I have had many students write at home four and five times the length intended and tell me they have "done it" already. They have usually "done" a loose, meandering plot summary, punctuated by copious "so..., so..., and then ...and so and then." Amen.
3. Tell the class all they need to do is (a) read the book, (b) remember the title, (c) recall the names of major characters, and (d) remember a few good scenes from the book. All of these chores are manageable and, in fact, seem, at first, too easy.
4. Tell the students to bring paper, pen and themselves to class, and that the teacher will supply the map for the distance to be covered. In another metaphor, indicate that the teacher will supply the steel frame and the class supplies the bricks (ideas) for the building (report).

Preliminaries reduce some of the anxious moments and once-and-for all stop the students in their tracks before they get lost in pages and pages of unneeded details .

The Introduction: to communicate basic background

1. At the blackboard show the students where they are going: draw four sections, labeling them as to content: an introduction (where, who, what); the main characters and their importance;

the best scene; and the end which lets the reader know the report is finished. Assure them that they will get step-by-step assistance.

2. Now erase all but the first section and concentrate on getting into the book. Students label a sheet of paper "outline" which they work on with the teacher in class. At home they can write from the outline.
3. At the board set up an outline using some kind of logic. Discourage worry about perfection of Harvard outlines, etc. No one needs protracted queries about Roman numerals versus capital letters.
4. Using a student's book as an example, write the title of the book. The class should do the same on their paper. Here is an opportunity to teach areas of capitalization and format.
5. Ask students to tell about the setting of their books in terms of place and date. Since many mystery books are not specific, students will need help to draw valuable inferences about location and time frames. Here is an opportunity to build vocabulary: contemporary, recent, rural, suburban, urban, decade. Suggest phraseology for handling setting: " in the distant past," "far in the future," fairly modern," etc.
6. Again using examples from students' books, get names of main characters and in one or two sentences state the conflict. Do several examples in which the names are mentioned and their place in the mystery stated. Actually, the teacher is demonstrating the writing of main ideas, an essential in organized, effective writing.

Now the first paragraph is set up and students "see" the map: title, setting, main characters, and statement of conflict. Ask several students to orally do theirs with assistance. Students can then write an introduction at home and return the next day with something done which is on target, orderly, but individual.

The Main Characters: who is who and who does what

1. First students need assistance in deciding who is a main character. Some will want to list eight people. I recommend insisting that they keep the number down to two or three.
2. The characters are each going to be described according to physical appearance, personality, and behavior in the story. Practice with examples taken from the books read, showing students how a description can be done in one succinct sentence. They will catch on: she is an attractive, nineteen-year-old girl with a sharp mind and plenty of bravery.
3. Having done some combination of oral and blackboard practice describing characters, ask students why these characters are important to the story. Many will not understand the question. Examples will be needed for clarification. Have students tell what particular main characters do in their struggles. Then write sentences which demonstrate a statement of a character's role: "She was important to the story because she acts as a decoy to get Mr. Griffin into his car so that the other kids that (sic) were lurking in the back seat could kidnap him." (student example)

At this point the students have direction for the second paragraph, and most will be able to put ideas on paper with surprising ease. Some will even jump the gun and write before the examples are finished on the board. Eagerness is knowing how to proceed with confidence.

The Best Scene: its ripe and waiting to be picked

1. Capitalize on the penchant we all have for retelling the unforgetable scene, the scene we waited for, the scene we can see over and over again in our mind. Kids love to tell the scariest, most suspenseful, most surprising scenes. Turn them loose and have an oral survey of scenes from volunteers. Actually, they are focusing on highlights of the book as perceived by themselves. It has some elements of the contrived, but students do put their personal imprint on it.
2. Write sample paragraphs of five or six sentences on the board based on information from volunteers. Suggest wordings; offer a "foot in the door": the best scene in the book occurred when....
3. Continue to emphasize the selection of pertinent detail and the combination of ideas rather than strings of S-V-Os. Blackboard examples are most welcome. Try your hand. Experiment.

The Conclusion: review, wrap it up, and stick your nose out

1. Ironically, the end or fourth paragraph is the apparently most difficult to compose probably because it is abstract rather than rooted in events to be reported.
2. Most students think the composition ends when

the hero and heroine ride off into the sunset, i.e., when the action stops, the pen drops: an insidious virus which threatens judgmental and analytical thought.

3. Begin by having the book title repeated. This step will help to move thinking away from detailed plot summarizing and toward more general patterns of summarized action.
4. Explain that an ending should look like an ending: it should tell the reader what has just been presented and leave him or her with a sense that the writer has made a point, has communicated a feeling,' and has encouraged or discouraged the reader.
5. Direct students back to the first paragraph and the initial statement of basic conflict. Offer examples of reworded conflict statements taken from students' paragraphs. Demonstrate that an idea can usually be expressed in different words without losing meaning.
6. Suggest what is entertaining about mysteries: suspense, detective work, surprises, etc. Ask students what their books offer the reader. Make suggestions. Write examples on board and polish them up.

Summary

That's it. The trip was not as long nor as arduous as expected. In four or five class periods a fairly well-organized composition has

been set up and written. They are obviously part teacher and part student, an amalgam of the experienced and the neophyte. Anxiety has been reduced, some confidence has been instilled, and a lesson has been taught which unites form and content with language development across a spectrum of vocabulary, diction, and sentence structure.

All of this is only a small step. But a child holds a parent's hand before she walks. Surely students need a hand--academic and emotional--from their teachers. After the first step who knows the limits? Who doubts eternity's sunrise?

Samples of student work are attached.

Notes

1. Applebee, Arthur, Fran Lehr and Anne Auten. "Learning to Write in the Secondary School: How and Where," English Journal, 70(September 1981).

2. "Students' Writing Trouble," Newsday, Thursday, November 12, 1981, p. 12.

3. Bettelheim, Bruno and Karen Zelan. "Why Children Don't Like to Read," The Atlantic Monthly, 248(November 1981).

The Undertaker's Gone Bananas

Bobby and Laurie are going to prove that, The Undertaker's Gone Bananas. The story, or chase as your going to find out, takes place in Fort Lee, New Jersey, in the recent past. Bobby has a wild imagination, and with Laurie's help will prove that Mr. Hulka, the undertaker, killed his wife.

Kidding Mr. Griffin

Sue McConnel and David Ruggles are the main characters in this book. She was not very attractive or popular. Many kids took advantage of her because she was so naive. She was important to the story because she acts as a decoy to get Mr. Griffin into his car so that the other kids that were lurking in the back seat could kidnap him, bring him to the top of a mountain, and tie him up for a while. Mark was the "leader" of the group. He had an expressionless face which rarely changed, bright shiny eyes, and a sharply pointed chin. He was very clever and thought up all the strategy used to get Mr. Griffin. He always seemed to get the group out of trouble when they were coming close to getting caught.

Lucky Starr and the Rings of Saturn

The best scene of my story occurred when Lucky Starr was being forced to testify against Earth because they had Bigman hostage. Sten Devoure was questioning him and all the members of the conference were going to fight against Earth because of Earths alleged invasion. Then Agas Doremo, a friend of Hector Conway, chief councilman of Earth, ashed the conference if Hector Conway could cross-examine the witness, Lucky Starr. When Hector Conway cross-examined Lucky Starr, they found out that Sirius was really invading Earths territory so Sirius left and Lucky Starr got back Bigman. This scene is the best because Lucky outsmarted the Sirians

The Lesson is Murder

In my book, The Lesson is Murder the reader has a chance to meet Mr Sanders and see what a clever man he is, and to meet Muffy Montgomery and learn about the little ordeal she had. The story shows a kind of whodunnit mystery where there are many characters which makes it interesting to find out who really did it. The readers also have a chance to play detective and hunt for clues to try and solve the mystery themselves before reading who actually did it.